

*ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CINEMA*

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Beauty plays a central role in James S. Williams' *Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema*. For Williams, beauty was suspicious to the first generation of African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène, who felt that beauty would detract from political engagement and meaning in their Third Cinema-inspired work, while the subsequent generation of filmmakers like Souleymane Cissé, Gaston Kaboré and Idrissa Ouedraogo engaged in a much more 'poetic' cinema that perhaps pleased more than it challenged western perceptions of Africa. If the first is a 'baobab cinema' in which shots of baobab trees regularly demonstrate not (just) 'environmental beauty' but also a 'material being' that continues to survive in spite of hardship (pp. 5-6), then the second phase is a 'calabash cinema' that 'returns to the source' (p. 2), or to a pre-colonial (mythical?) Africa. These two phases of African cinema, which in some senses overlap and are complicated by in-between filmmakers like Djibril Diop Mambéty, are nonetheless followed by a contemporary, millennial cinema that tries to span both the physicality of the baobab and the metaphysicality of the calabash, in the process 'reconceiving the aesthetic as a vital point of departure for addressing and interrogating the political in ways no longer tied to the original Sembenian political ideals of pan-Africanism' (p. 14). In other words, beauty now functions 'relationally,' in that it need not reaffirm an otherwise fixed and external worldview, or be 'transcendent' and thus not of this world, but rather (after Sarah Nuttall, who in turn is drawing upon Elaine Scarry) serves to 'un-self' us (p. 30), such that we are not viewers who are, as Aimé Césaire might put it, detachedly observing a spectacle as one might a dancing bear, but who instead can see, hear and be affected by the 'screaming man' who expresses what it means to live in a contemporary Africa defined by

the often total erosion of the state due to uncontrolled neoliberalism, causing social disintegration and fragmentation at a local level; increased Chinese economic influence and investment in the sub-Saharan region; destabilization due to religious fundamentalism and mounting intolerance and ethnic violence (including genocide); demographic explosion and the development of the African mega-city or 'afropolis'; displacement and migration to Europe at unprecedented levels, aggravated by the

catastrophic effects of climate change and ‘manmade’ natural disasters like desertification. (p. 13)

Given that Césaire’s reference to a screaming man in *Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal* is referenced not only by Williams (see p. 39), but also directly by both Abderrahmane Sissako—in *La vie sur terre* (*Life on Earth*, 1998)—and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun—in *Un homme qui crie* (*A Screaming Man*, 2010)—then it perhaps comes as no surprise that these two filmmakers, along with Mambéty as perhaps their most clear precursor, become constant points of reference for Williams over the course of his monograph, with key roles also played by Mati Diop, Alain Gomis, Sembène and others.

After the opening chapter in which Williams also outlines how the aesthetic can become ‘flipped over’ and ‘frozen’ as far as its political effectiveness is concerned (p. 38), he goes on to explore the role of violence in contemporary African cinema. Williams asserts with reference to Nyasha Mboti that African filmmakers do not simply make violent films, but rather seek to expose ‘the hidden, hegemonic system of violence invisible to the naked eye, yet which underpins and enables all other forms of violence’ (p. 41). This can take the form of violence towards women, as explored in Sembène’s final film, *Moolaadé* (2004), child soldiery as per *Ezra* (Newton I. Aduaka, 2007), violent dictatorship, as per Haroun’s *Hissein Habré, une tragédie tchadienne* (*Hissein Habré, A Chadian Tragedy*, 2016), or the atrocities of war as explored in Fanta Régina Nacro’s *La nuit de la vérité* (*The Night of Truth*, 2004). With regard to *Hissein Habré*, the film in particular resists ‘the genericity of genocide... by prioritizing the individual and unique, the personal and the flawed, as part of a “poetics of resistance”’ (p. 52). Meanwhile, Nacro’s film equally avoids ‘the fatal violence of narrative spectacle’ (p. 59)—and so each of these films demonstrates a kind of ‘opaque vision’ with regard to (cinematic) violence (p. 60), which style reaches its apogee in Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006), where the filmmaker suggests the violence of structural debt in often indirect but powerful ways, thus creating a kind of ‘violent beauty’ (p. 44). Even though Williams considers the video footage that we see towards the end of *Bamako* as being ‘sub-Sissako’ (p. 77), the chapter then ends with Williams charging against Sissako for making *Timbuktu* (2014) too beautiful—and indeed for not directly depicting the violence that the film involves (choosing a magisterial long shot for a murder, for example), even as Williams also finds the film too didactic in its condemnation of Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary Mali.

Chapter three considers the afore-mentioned contemporary afropolis, with Williams charting the representation of Dakar on film from *Borom Sarret* (Sembène, 1963) and *Contras’city* (Mambéty, 1968) through to Gomis’ *Tey* (*Aujourd’hui*, 2012) and Diop’s essayistic reworking of her uncle’s *Touki-Bouki* (Mambéty, 1973) in *Mille soleils* (*A Thousand Suns*, 2013). Dakar is a city that has mushroomed in the contemporary era, with the

distinction between the rich and poor areas, having been so pronounced in the earlier films, now giving way to uncertainty: ‘central Dakar is no longer the iconic and ironically circumscribed white space high on the urban horizon, but instead a continually alienating, atomizing, anonymous concrete and iron expanse’ (p. 111). Considering *Dakar Trottoirs* (Hubert Laba Ndao, 2013), Williams argues that the afropolis is ‘an anonymous, frameless site of open danger and disorder’ (p. 114), while *Mille soleils*, in its blend of found footage from *Touki-Bouki* with original material featuring the same lead actors some 40 years later, suggests that ‘the real *is* the found *is* the (re)enacted *is* the narrative *is* the poetic *is* the biographical *is* the fantasmatic’ (p. 134). With regard to Dakar, this blurs the distinction between the everyday and the imagined, making of it an ever-elusive space that in its elusiveness also becomes the breeding ground for new (hybrid) possibilities.

In the next chapter, Williams focuses on language, noting the importance of (francophone) African cinema’s evolution from French to Wolof in Sembène’s *Mandabi* (1968), before blooming into the polyphonic cinema of Sissako and Haroun, especially the former’s *Bamako* and *Heremakono* (*Waiting for Happiness*, 2002), and the latter’s *Screaming Man*. Of *Heremakono*, Williams suggests that ‘language as communication and sign is suspended in order to be experienced materially and physically’ (p. 158) as we see characters failing fully to understand each other, and as we hear on the soundtrack passing ships that help to diminish the centrality of the human in relation to the non-human. Where we should not treat a screaming man like a dancing bear and simply watch him as if he were a spectacle, though, Williams conversely contends that ‘it might sometimes be a more affirmative critical first step to do “nothing” in the direct face of ecological disaster and instead allow things simply to be (as things) *aesthetically*’ (p. 162)—even as this seems to conform very closely to his reasons for dismissing *Timbuktu* as sub-par work. Nonetheless, sometimes the sound of a voice is more meaningful than its actual words (as per the sung plea of Zégué Bamba in *Bamako*). And while we might not detachedly observe, sometimes to listen is wilfully to enter into relation with the other, and to allow language to achieve, after Achille Mbembe, *power and beauty* (p. 170).

Even as Dakar is a hybrid space, it is also a straight space (with baobab cinema also being a straight cinema). It is only outside of Dakar, according to *Karmen Gei* (Joseph Gaï Ramaka, 2001), that ‘polymorphous desire’ can occur. Williams notes that there is not much in the way of African queer cinema—especially outside of South Africa—but he nonetheless does pick up on queer elements in a range of films, including Mohamed Camara’s *Dakan* (*Destiny*, 1997) and Haroun’s work, in which the director creates ‘an erotics of male abstraction and intimacy.’ For example, in *A Screaming Man*, the central father and son relationship takes on an erotic subtext as they swim together and touch each other, as do the dance displays that are an integral part of *Grigris* (Haroun, 2013). In this way, Haroun *queers*

the ‘mighty, sacred baobab tree planted so proudly by Sembene in *Mandabi* as the privileged symbol of social progress, continuity and masculinity’ (p. 205)—even as the baobab supposedly did not have a metaphysical function in Sembène’s cinema.

In the sixth chapter, Williams considers migration and border-crossing in numerous recent films, noting various common trends or ‘modalities,’ including getting off the ground ‘the initial project, the journey across the Atlantic, migration across the African continent, intercontinental migration beyond Africa and Europe, and the return home and its aftermath’ (p. 218). Sissako again looms large here, with *Waiting for Happiness* typifying the first modality described above, and *Rostov-Luanda* (Sissako, 1998) the last. *Life on Earth* receives particular attention, since the film demonstrates how migration exists beyond the literal journeys enumerated above but also as a ‘an existential state of mind and being’ (p. 234). More broadly, then, Africa as a whole ‘migrates’ in the sense that it cannot be restricted to ‘a single reified definition and interpretation... [but is] always in the process of being “transnationalised”’ (p. 246). As beauty, opaque depictions of violence and listening all inspire relationality, this transnational becoming of Africa also entails a ‘becoming world’ of the film and for the viewer, and which has at its core Sissako’s Césaire- and Frantz Fanon-inspired depiction of ‘the ultimate unreadability of the human and non-human worlds’ (p. 257). This is conveyed powerfully in a long shot that swallows the human protagonists of *Life on Earth* (even as Williams critiques Sissako for using the same technique—too obviously, apparently—in *Timbuktu*); unable to ‘read’ the image and the vibrant world that it depicts, the viewer is pushed towards thought (or must listen) in order to learn how to read. In this way, they understand that they are not detached spectators, but entities ecologically entangled with the rest of existence.

Williams then concludes with an analysis of Gomis’ *Félicité* (2017), which he considers an example of a film that elides the art house style of the likes of Haroun and Sissako with the seemingly more challenging aesthetic put forward by ‘video’ industries such as Nollywood, the piecemeal Nigerian film industry that makes its presence felt on several occasions in Williams’ book, but which never fully forms a focus for his analyses. All the same, where the use of video is ‘sub-Sissako’ in *Bamako*, with *Félicité* it becomes an important innovation in African cinema.

Williams is not unaware of his relentless ‘good’ taste, as he consciously focuses primarily on (and seems to favour) transnational (often French-backed) and often sub-Saharan francophone productions (‘FESPACO art cinema’), while to a large degree ignoring Nollywood and the other African film industries that nonetheless constitute important components of contemporary African cinema. All the same, *Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema* could perhaps find more worth in those other industries, not least because they are enabled by the same technologies that allow Diop to create *Mille*

*soleils*, about which Williams is otherwise so enthusiastic. Perhaps they lack ostensible subtlety, which might explain why Williams is so down on *Timbuktu*, even as various of its features are lauded when deployed in other contexts, as I have hinted above. Perhaps I am simply more easily seduced than Williams by Sissako's most successful international film, demonstrating my own infirmity as a critical thinker. But in the same way that Williams gives short shrift to Kenneth D. Harrow for his exploration of African cinema in relation to trash, perhaps in part because Harrow perpetuates a 'dirty' image of Africa even as he tries to critique the same, so does Williams' emphasis on (politicised) beauty run the risk of undermining his own argument (and even as Williams discusses trash, dirt and other related concepts on various occasions throughout the book). That is, as Williams resists essentialising African cinema, he perhaps does it so much that re-essentialises it, or 'flips it over'—as per his own warning at the end of his introductory chapter.

*Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema* is beautifully written and contains many insightful analyses of a wide range of important texts, with Sissako and Haroun at the fore—as their global reputations perhaps demand. Nonetheless, when a film like *Timbuktu* or the use of video in both Nollywood and *Bamako* crops up, it is dismissed for not quite fitting Williams' theoretical model. Perhaps a fuller understanding of African cinema would come from a less partial reading, or at least one that listens to, rather than judges, the work. For the most part, Williams brilliantly does precisely this. But on occasion it would seem that his own good tastes are incapable of admitting as powerfully real (or of hearing?) the otherwise distasteful/cacophonic elements that, through their very distastefulness/cacophony, might have a perverse beauty of their own—or which might indeed challenge and help us to develop the (Francophile? European? Imperial? FESPACO?) art house iterations and interpretations of cinematic beauty that underpin this text.